Vigilant Engine House
648-650 Main Street
Wheeling
Ohio County
West Virginia

HABS No. WV-196

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

VIGILANT ENGINE HOUSE HABS No. WV-196

Location: 648-650 Main Street, Wheeling, Ohio County, West Virginia.

Present Owner: City of Wheeling.

Present Occupant: Not occupied.

Present Use: Not in use.

Significance: This fire house is the second built on this site. It was home to Vigilant Steam Fire Engine Company Number 3, one of the four original city fire companies. The present structure was built to replace the original building, which burned in 1891. Its handsomc Main Street facade of brick and terra cotta inlay is capped by a classical pediment on the bell tower where the "1891" construction date is inscribed.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: c. 1892. The property was built by contract awarded by the Committee on Fire Department July 27, 1891.

2. Architect: None known.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The Vigilant Engine House was built on the north half of Lot 26, Jonathan Zane's Addition, Wheeling. Prior to 1892, the lot on which the fire house was built was owned and managed by the City as Vigilant Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 3. The following reference tracing the title of Lot 26 is found in the Ohio County, West Virginia Deed Book.

1847 Deed, 1 May, Deed Book 29, page 409. The City of Wheeling purchased the north half of Lot 26 in Jonathan Zane's Addition for $400.00 from George Mendel and his wife, Sarah, and Alexander Pannell.

4. Original plans, construction, etc: Not known.

5. Alterations and additions: Although there are no existing plans for this fire station, it is apparent that the front left engine door was changed, most probably to accommodate new and larger fire engines. This change is visible on the Main Street facade because the symmetry has been altered and there is a band of new brick work which extends from above the engine doors to the second floor window sills.

   Inside, the first floor now has a poured concrete floor which extends two-thirds of the way toward the rear of the structure. The rear one-third of the building, where the station horses were stalled, now has wooden flooring. The rear doorway through which the horses passed to the outdoor exercise area has been reduced in width by two side panel inserts.

   The stairway connecting the first and second floors is not original to the 1891 construction. Although the exact configuration of the stairway is difficult to determine, it was most probably in the same general area as it is now.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

In 1869 the Wheeling City Counncil passed an ordinance which established a paid city fire department. This ordinance divided the city into two fire districts. The first district covered the area north of Wheeling Island. The second district included all of the city south of Wheeling Creek.

There are four originating fire companies: United Fire Engine Co. No. 1, Atlantic Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 2, Vigilant Steam Fire Engine Co. No. 3, Hook and Ladder Co. No. 1.

On April 30, 1891 the Vigilant Engine House burned. The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer on Friday, May 1, 1891 reported that it seemed "a little odd that an engine house should be burned, especially in the daylight when the whole force is on duty." Moments after the fire had been discovered and reported to the firemen on duty, the engine was connected to a nearby fire plug and "the work of putting out the fire was well in progress." Other companies, however, were mystified by the alarm and reported "to several different boxes before the location of the fire was discovered." The second story where the blaze began was completely burned out, and the entire building was rendered uninhabitable. The loss was estimated to be $2,500.00.

The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer thereafter ran an advertisement under its "Proposals" column which announced that "sealed proposals will be received at the City Clerk's Office until Thursday, July 23 at 3 o'clock P.M. for the construction of an engine house for Vigilant No. 3 on premises, North Main Street, Wheeling, West Virginia. Plans and specifications can be seen at City Clerk's Office up to that date."

On July 28 the Committee on the Fire Department reported to the Second Branch Council that they had met July 27 to open bids for the erection of a new Engine House on North Main Street. They awarded the contract to Wilson and Chapman, whose bid of $6,597.00 was the lowest which they had received. The Council approved the contract, and building commenced shortly thereafter

Advertisements appearing in the 1890-91 edition of the Wheeling City Dirctory indicate that Wilson and Chapman ran a builders' supply business. W. A. Wilson, one of Wilson & Chapman's two proprietors, was also involved in Wilson & Co., a concern of carpenters and builders. It is possible that Wilson & Chapman were able to contract their services at the lowest bid because of this arrangement.

Vigilant Engine House continued to serve North Wheeling until just recently, when a new and completely modernized fire house replaced it.

Bibliography:

Callin's Wheeling City Directory, 1890-91.

Galligan, B. A. ed. Laws and Ordinances for the Government of the City of Wheeling. Wheeling, West Virginia: Lewis Baker & Co., Steam Book & Job Printers, 1881.

Rose, Edward T., "The First Paid Fire Department," in 1944 Yearbook, Wheeling, West Virginia sponsored by Local 12, International Association of Fire Fighters and prepared and edited by Edward H. Hubert.

Second Branch Council, City of Wheeling. 1890-1892. (July 28, 1891, p.319) minutes of meetings kept by the city clerk.

Wheeling Daily Intelligencer. Friday, May 1, 1891 "Engine House Burned."

Prepared by: Candace Reed
Historic American
Buildings Survey
September, 1976

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The fire station built in 1891 is one of the oldest public structures standing in Wheeling. It is of particular interest for its inlaid terra cotta moulding and center tower.

2. Condition of fabric: The exterior brickwork is fairly intact, but the building is in generally poor condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Rectangular; approximately thirty-four feet across three-bay front by seventy-two feet deep; two stories.

2. Foundations: Stone and brick.

3. Wall construction, finish and color: The exterior walls are brick laid in common bond.

4. Structural system, framing: The floors and roof are timber frame construction on the upper floors. The first is supported by masonry piers and shallow arches of corrugated metal and concrete resting on wide steel flanges.

5. Chimneys: There were originally four chimneys, as vents for the heating system. There are now three, as one has been broken off and the opening sealed.

6. Openings:

a. Doors and doorways: Two large overhead rolling doors mark the first floor (west) facade. They are hinged wood frames with multiple glass lights. The opening on the right is original, while the door on the left has been enlarged to accomodate larger fire trucks. This alteration is significant in that it has broken the symmetry of the facade. Fixed glass light panels are above each door. The lintel over each doorway is partially expressed on the exterior by a brick soldier course. There was originally a double door in the center at the rear. These doors, although in very poor condition, are still attached, but the doorway has been reduced in size and replaced with one door.

b. Windows and shutters: SEE photographs for front windows. There is one small window high up on each side wall. The rear first-floor windows have been boarded up. The second floor rear has both two-over-two-light and six-over-six light double-hung sash windows.

Roof:

a. Shape, covering: The roof is sloped from front to back. A two-and-one-half-foot parapet extends above the roof on the front (west). From this section the roof rises on a steep slope to a level about six feet above the low portion. From this level the roof extends back in a shallow slope. It is flanked to the north and south by low parapet walls extending above roof line. Part of the steep sloped roof has asphalt shingles. The remainder of the roof has tar paper and contemporary built-up roofing materials.

b. Cornice, eaves: SEE photographs.

c. Dormers, cupolas, towers: SEE photographs and elevation drawing.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Both the first and second floor are very simply organized. The front section of the first floor housed the fire fighting carriages when the building was constructed, and horses were kept in stalls at the rear. Later, when trucks were employed, the stall area in the southeast quadrant was converted to storage and a kitchen. The walls appear to be in approximately the original location, although at one time the stalls may have extended across the entire width of the building. The second floor, according to firemen who have used the building, was originally one large room. It served as the living quarters for the firemen. It is now divided into two sections - one large space in the front, directly over the truck area. The fire pole is still in place in the center of the room. There is access to the roof from a wall ladder in this room. The rear section has been partitioned into rooms on either side of a corridor which extends to the rear wall of the building. These rooms include toilet, shower and lounge spaces. The basement extends the full dimensions of the building. It includes a boiler space, coal storage area, and other open space for general storage.

2. Stairways: The stairway to the second floor is located toward the middle of the building along the north wall. There is a landing at midpoint where the stair turns 90 to the wall and up into the second floor hallways. From observation of the interior wall configuration, there is evidence that the stair has been altered to some extent. Another wood frame stair near the south east corner of the truck area leads to the basement.

3. Flooring: The basement is concrete and dirt. The first floor is concrete in the front and wooden planks in the rear. The second floor is wooden plank, covered with composition board at some later date.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Both the first and second floors have high ceilings - about fourteen feet. The first floor ceiling is pressed tin, and the second floor ceiling is plaster on lath. The first floor walls are exposed brick with the exception of the wooden partitions. These are vertical beaded tongue and groove boards on studs. The second floor walls are primarily plaster, painted. There is some beaded tongue and groove and also some tile in the shower area.

5. Doors and doorways: There are some wide doors in the partition wall at the first floor, rear. These appear to be part of the original horse stall doors. They incorporate an interesting wooden pilaster detail at the jambs. The second floor doors may not be original but are certainly fairly early.

6. Special decorative features: The tin ceiling and stall doors.

7. Notable hardware: The firepole.

8. Mechanical equipment and fixtures: A fixture of note not previously mentioned is the hose drying rack along the south wall. The rack itself has been removed, but the wall and floor opening are still intact. The original heating was steam, and steam radiators are still in evidence. A steam boiler is in the basement. Coal was delivered through a steel trap door near the first floor.

D. Site and Surroundings:

The building is an urban setting: It faces west and fronts directly on Main Street. There are buildings to either side, north and south. An interesting site feature is the courtyard, approximately thirty-four feet by eighteen feet at the rear of the building. This brick paved courtyard is surrounded by a high masonry retaining wall to accommodate a major grade change at the back of the site. A stairway along the south exterior courtyard wall leads up to the level above.

Prepared by: John McRae
Historic American
Buildings Survey
September 1976

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, and Kenneth L. Anderson, HABS Principal Architect, in cooperation with the Friends of Wheeling, Inc. The measured drawings were made during the summer of 1976 under the supervision of John M. McCrae (University of Florida) with architectural technicians Mark L. Hall, Foreman, (Pennsylvania State University); Edward C. Freeman (Arzona State University); Ruthie D. Wiley (Mississippi State University); Alan G. Wilig (City College of New York); and Architectural Historian Candace Reed (George Washington University). The photographs were taken in 1977 by HABS photographer Jack E. Boucher.

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